Miles, Mutants & Microbes

Preface

My author's preface for this collection is both a history, and an apologia—a word which means not an expression of regret for a fault, but a speech in defense. (What I'll be defending is my selection criteria for assembling this grouping of tales, and it will mainly be of interest to old Bujold readers.)

New readers need have no fear: dive right in! The stories here will explain themselves as they go. In this volume you will find two novels and a novella from what, due to my reluctance to coin a suitably imposing-sounding series name, its fans have eventually dubbed "the Vorkosiverse," after its most memorable and central (but far from only) character and his family. Science fiction and fantasy are the only genres I know where a series is defined by what universe it is set in (making mainstream fiction, looked at with the right squint, the world's largest shared-universe series). All the tales under this cover belong in the same "future history," if at widely divergent times.

What links them, mostly, are the quaddies, a race of humans bioengineered to live in zero-gravity that you will meet in the kick-off novel for this omnibus, Falling Free. This book falls early both in the timeline of its universe and in my career; it was the fourth novel I ever wrote and also the fourth published, and won both my first appearance in the venerable Analog Magazine and my first Nebula award. Taking place some two hundred years before the main body of stories, in it

Barrayar (and the Vorkosigans) have not yet been discovered by the universe at large. The second tale, the novella "Labyrinth," introduces both a new quaddie character, and Miles Vorkosigan in his "Admiral Naismith" hat. (He has more than one persona, sprawling over several books, but I think you'll get enough about him in the novella to go on with; it was written to stand alone and indeed also appeared as a self-contained story in Analog.) The third tale, Diplomatic Immunity, as of this writing the most recent of my Vorkosiverse novels, brings elements of the first two tales around to meet again, in much more depth and detail.

At this point, the new reader is most welcome to stop reading this introduction and go read the real stories, which will be much more fun. You can circle back later for the "how these came to be written" part, which will then make much more sense. Anyone who still wants more orientation (though I don't think it will be needed) can have a peek at the series timeline included in the back of this volume. Don't be daunted by the accumulation; due to my decision to write all these books, though linked, as potential stand-alones, you don't have to read them in order or all at once.

Old readers will note that the novella "Labyrinth" also appears in the Baen omnibus Miles, Mystery & Mayhem, in its due position in a strict series timeline. Up until the novel Memory, the series grouped in internal-chronological order in a very tidy fashion, with two novels and a novella for each collection. (With the exception of the first, Cordelia's Honor, which is more the re-marriage of two halves of one intended tale, as explained in its afterword.) From Memory on, however, there was no way to make the books divide up evenly no matter how they were sliced. All the grouping schemes had a different defect: too much text, too little, the separation of strongly thematically linked tales that truly belonged together, and so on.

So the repackaging effort stalled out for a long time. But when the time came around on the guitar again to relicense the books, I was finally inspired to cut the Gordian knot in this fashion: the pivotal Memory left as a stand-alone, the Miles-and-Ekaterin sequence collected together in the upcoming Miles in Love (an inevitable title if ever there was one), and the quaddie-linked tales put together, here.

You are not—all you internet complainers, and you know who you are—being ripped off by your faithful publisher by being tricked into buying the same story twice. Due to the vagaries of tree-ware economics, this volume would have been the exact same price (if much less comprehensible) if the novella hadn't been included at all. It's being thrown in for free as a gift to the new readers. And it was my idea, so don't kvetch at Publisher Toni. (You can kvetch at me, I suppose; I hang out pretty regularly on Baen's Bar in the "Miles to Go" conference, so I'm not too hard to find.) This was an artistic decision,

not an economic one.

So there. On to the history.

Falling Free actually came to be written as a result of a phone conversation with Jim Baen. I had written my first three science fiction novels "on spec," that is, without a prior contract or even contact with a publisher, which is pretty much the norm for first-time novelists. They sold on one memorable day in October, 1985, in my very first phone conversation with Jim, when, after reading The Warrior's Apprentice, he called me up and offered for all three books. I was then faced, for the first time, with writing a novel with a known publishing destination, and intimidating expectations.

I had been thinking of following up a minor character from The Warrior's Apprentice named Arde Mayhew, a jump pilot afflicted with obsolete neural implant technology who would be on a quest for a ship that would fit him. I pictured him finding his prize among a group of people dwelling in an asteroid belt whose ancestors were bioengineered to live in free fall, and who were eking out a living, among other ways, as interstellar junk dealers. Jim was not much taken with Arde, but he seemed to perk up when I came to describe my proto-quaddies, and opined that a tale about them might be more interesting and science fictional. We all know what happens when technological obsolescence hits the products of engineering; what would happen if (always a key SFnal question) technological obsolescence hit the products of bioengineering?

Taking the hint, I turned my thoughts to developing the quaddies' world, culture, and history. It seemed to me best to begin at the beginning, and I reasoned my way backward to their two-hundred-years-prior genesis. I decided to make my protagonist a welding engineer because I knew the type—my father was a professor in the subject, and one of my brothers had taken his degree in the specialty. This also seemed to handily solve my technical research problems; with two small children in tow at the time, I knew I wasn't going to be able to get very far from home to do research, or much of anything else. This would have been early 1986.

I was about five chapters into the tale when my father died of a long-standing heart condition, in July of that year. At the timely invitation of then senior Baen editor Betsy Mitchell, I took a needed break to write my first novella—also the first work I'd ever sold before I wrote it, a scary step into a larger world for me as a writer. But "The Borders of Infinity" turned out well, and found its place in Betsy's novella collection series in Free Lancers, along with tales by Orson Scott Card and David Drake, which may well have served as the first introduction of this new writer Bujold to some of their readers. After a few months, I was able to return to work on Falling Free and, my confidence boosted, send it to contract.

I turned at that point for technical research answers to my brother and, through him, to an engineer friend of his named Wally Voreck, who sent me the fascinating material on ice die formation, which is a real industrial process. With such a cool (literally) gimmick, I reasoned my way backward to a plot development that would use it as a solution. (Writers cheat with time, you know. We can run it both ways.)

So the tale wended to its conclusion, or at any rate, grew long enough to qualify as a publishable book. At the time, it seemed to suggest further developments. It was clearly a kind of Exodus story, which implied that maybe forty years in the wilderness should be volume two, and arrival at the Promised Land volume three, a proper trilogy. But I wandered off instead to write Brothers in Arms, and never got back to the idea of continuing the quaddie-genesis adventure. I already knew how it would come out, after all.

But I did manage to sell the novel to Analog Magazine as a four-part serial, which ran from December 1987 through February 1988. This brought my work to the attention of a whole pool of new readers who might not necessarily have picked the paperback (which came out in April of 1988) off the bookstore shelves. This was the first of several happy sales to Analog, one of my Dad's favorites back in the '50s and '60s, and one of the first SF magazines I'd read when I was discovering the genre in my early teens. Since Falling Free was very much a tribute (if slyly updated) to the science fiction of that era, it felt much like coming full circle. The serial also was splendidly illustrated by Vincent di Fate; I still have five of the scratchboard originals, my first real art purchase. (He kindly adjusted his rates to my budget.)

I was always horribly conscious of being a slow writer, by some genre standards. When the time came to negotiate my next contract with Baen (Jim called me up again, come to think), I hit on a time-saving idea: to offer a novella collection of my own, rescuing "The Borders of Infinity" and adding two new tales to it to make up the weight. Looking up the contracts for that period, I see this was the triple-header including Borders of Infinity (the proposed novella collection), Miles to Go (the first of many uses of that placeholder title —the book I actually wrote was Brothers in Arms) and something called Quaddies, the proposed Falling Free sequel that never came to fruition —I wrote The Vor Game in its place. My Baen contracts were always very flexible.

"Labyrinth" was the last-written of the Miles-adventure novellas. With two rather dark tales already in the bag, I decided to make this one something of a comedy, for balance. The character of the quaddie Nicol, though a rather minor player, got me thinking again about the quaddies and my lost promise to complete their saga, and how their exodus might have come out. But other stories were crowding for my attention, and the impulse slipped away yet again.

It was over a decade later before I had the chance to return to these notions. The opening situation of the book that became Diplomatic Immunity called for Miles, in his brand-new hat as a Barrayaran Imperial Auditor (a kind of high-level troubleshooter), to become involved in straightening out an imbroglio with a Barrayaran fleet at a deep-space station. I had an entire wormhole nexus to choose from for this setting, and it occurred to me that this gave me the long-awaited chance to visit Quaddiespace and finally see—fourteen years later!—how Falling Free had come out. Because I rather wanted to know. It was unfinished business that still niggled, though the time and impulse for anything like a direct sequel was past and long past.

So I wrote it. And I found out. And Quaddiespace was much better than I'd ever expected, more complex and subtler.

Diplomatic Immunity has a whole 'nother level that deals with the Matter of Miles, which the new reader can take up separately and later, but several of the novel's most important precursors are found in "Labyrinth." Most especially, of course, the tale of Bel Thorne, the Betan hermaphrodite, and the quaddie Nicol, although some of the unfinished business with Bel stems most directly from the end of Mirror Dance. But I found a certain pleasing roundness to connecting the first tale in this universe to, if not the last, the latest.

Now all we needed was a title, which proved almost the hardest part of all. (I would say, "But you should see the ones we discarded!" except that I don't think anyone ever should. Ever, ever.) We were by this time rather stuck with having "Miles" in somewhere, to give a proper series-signal to the prospective book purchaser. After that (and eliminating a great many dreadful puns), alliteration took over. But most of all, this omnibus, haunted as it is by the ghosts of books unwritten, never to be written, collects the quaddies in all their charm.

Enjoy!

Lois McMaster BujoldOctober 30, 2006